

THE POPCORN FISH

CHAD ARMENT

Not all mystery animals are large and monstrous. Kevin Stewart, a Canadian correspondent, brought this particular cryptid to my attention several years ago. It is a great example of a mystery animal that has managed to escape the notice of the general public—and even that of the cryptozoological community.

The Popcorn Fish was first reported in the summer of 1953 (Anon. 1980). The cook for a geological survey party in the Yukon caught a strange fish (“distinguished by having a large number of bumps on its head, which resembled popcorn”) in a lake 500 km north (slightly northeast, actually) of Whitehorse. The cook, Al Martin, had never seen anything like it, and he named it the Popcorn Fish. Then, he fried it up for a meal that he shared with two others.

Dr. Cas Lindsey, of the University of British Columbia, a freshwater fish specialist, heard this story, and the stories of bush pilots and others in that part of the Yukon. With Dr. Don McPhail, he set out in 1960 to the lake in question in an attempt to net the fish. Unfortunately, they only caught suckers, sculpin, and grayling. The following two stories were reported in regional papers regarding this expedition.

Tracking Down ‘Popcorn’ Fish

Fairbanks, Alaska, *Daily News-Miner*, June 22, 1960

Vancouver, B.C., June 22, (AP)—University of British Columbia scientists will seek the mysterious “popcorn” fish,

said to be in the Yukon's Peel River headwaters, during this season's collecting expeditions,

Under the direction of Dr. C. C. Lindsay, the expeditions will go into remote areas of northern B.C., Yukon, Alaska and Bering Sea islands.

The "popcorn" fish has been included consistently in reports from bush pilots, who say the fish has head lumps resembling popcorn.

This year's collections for the Institute of Fisheries already has yielded two specimens previously unknown in B.C. waters—the nine-spined stickleback and the emerald shiner, both found at Fort Nelson.

Scientists Fish in Alaska For Clues to Ancient Era

Fairbanks, Alaska, *Daily News-Miner*, October 28, 1960

Vancouver, B.C., (Special)—Belief that a land bridge once connected Asia with North America has been strengthened as a result of a summer expedition by scientists from the University of British Columbia's Institute of Fisheries.

The expedition, headed by Dr. C. C. Lindsey, found fresh water fishes on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea between Alaska and Russia. Dr. Lindsey, curator of fishes at UBC claims the three species of fresh water fishes found could not have reached the island except through the fresh water channels of a land bridge.

Three Specimens

The three specimens found on the island, which is about 100 miles in length and within sight of the Russian coastline, are the Alaska black fish, the Arctic grayling and the slimy sculpin.

The Alaska black fish is found only in the Arctic near the Bering Sea. The grayling is a sports fish.

The summer expedition sponsored by an annual grant from Dr. H. R. MacMillan and the Arctic Institute, yielded

1300 pounds of fish which was preserved for study by scientists at UBC.

Dr. Lindsey and his associates also made a trip to the headwaters of the Peel River in the Yukon in search of the “popcorn” fish, so-called because of numerous bumps on its head. Despite repeated attempts to net the fish the party was unable to capture one.

Indian tales of fresh water flying fish were investigated at another lake reached by chartered plane.

The flying fish proved to be dwarf Arctic grayling, a small fish with large fins. The lake investigated was so overpopulated with the fish that their constant leaping into the air for food sounded like rain falling on the lake surface.

This was apparently the only official expedition in search of the strange fish. Dr. Lindsey noted that it was possible that the original Popcorn Fish was an ordinary sculpin or sucker “with some type of abnormal head growths, possibly caused by parasites” (Anon. 1980). He did not rule out the possibility, however, that it could be a unique species surviving in this remote area, stating, “If Canadians are prepared to believe in the Sasquatch and in Ogopogo, they should keep an open mind about more plausible creatures like the popcorn fish.”

In any case, this strange mystery fish has marked its spot on the map. After reviewing Dr. Lindsey’s notes, the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Place Names officially recognized Popcornfish Lake. The lake can be found at 65.4639°N, 133.8056°W.

REFERENCES

- Anonymous. 1980. On the trail of the elusive popcorn fish. *UBC Reports* (University of British Columbia) 26(16: August 27): 2.